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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the use of behavior contracts for students with behavior problems in martial arts classrooms. Highlighted is the experience of one marital arts teacher with a preteen student who constantly disrupts the class. The behavior contract let the student continue participating while outlining specific expectations for him, his mother, and the instructor. Breaching the contract could result in penalties such as losing rank, suspension, or expulsion. When honored, the contract would let him be promoted to the next belt and earn the respect of his instructors, parent, and classmates. The teacher presented the contract to the student and his mother; the student read it aloud; then all three signed it. The mother agreed to post it on their refrigerator to help him remember the agreement. After signing the contract, the student's positive attitude and behavior increased significantly in class, at home, and in school. He made progress toward higher level belts, and he became a responsible member of the class. Behavior contracts can be effective both inside and outside of academic classrooms because they offer structured guidelines for the student and expected behaviors and consequences for undesired actions. A copy of the behavior contract is appended. (SM)

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ED 437 370

Behavioral Contracts in the Martial Arts Classroom

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I am an eight-grade science teacher who has been teaching martial arts classes at a local YMCA. Our program is interested not only with self-defense skills, but also in the complete personal development of each student. Each student progresses through a system of colored belt rankings by displaying both improvements in martial arts techniques and a positive attitude outlined by our program. The principle values we promote are honor, compassion, loyalty, courage, and humility. Furthermore, classes and promotion are challenging and like many things in life, students must invest practice time outside of the classroom in order to experience true success. It is our hope that students realize the reward of hard work and apply that idea toward other aspects of their lives.

Typically in the youth class, students are hardworking and serious about learning martial arts. Their attitudes are positive and I seldom need to use any type of discipline. However when a new nine-year-old student named Rex joined the class, I noticed he did not act and behave like the other students. His behavior was bazaar and erratic and I often found myself needing to discipline him with pushups or time-out. With Rex, every class was different and I never knew what to expect. On some days he would be fine, but on other days he seemed withdrawn and resistant to participating. When we discussed his abnormal behavior, the other instructors (also educated in the social sciences) and I agreed that Rex displayed behavioral traits of some type of emotional disorder.

After approximately four months, Rex's behavior and attitude seemed to improve. Then, suddenly, a situation erupted at school when he was about three weeks away from

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his first promotion to yellow belt. Just before class, his mother said that she needed to speak with me concerning what had happened at school. His mother began by telling me that in the second grade, Rex was classified as emotionally disturbed (ED) and has since been diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD), for which he takes medication. (After that, I observed that he had productive classes when he had taken his medication and unproductive classes when he had not.) His mother continued to explain how one day earlier that week, Rex had lashed out and was physically aggressive at school toward a student, a teacher, and the principal. He did not injure anyone, but this was inexcusable behavior. His school suspended him from attending class and enrolled him into a "home-bound" school program. Finally, Rex finished his school year in a special school that was specifically suited for children who could not function in the neighborhood public school.

Since our organization has no tolerance for violence, my first reaction was to suggest that Rex become involved in some other type of YMCA activity. I made a number of suggestions, but his mother had previously enrolled him in each of them. She said that this martial arts program was the only activity that he enjoyed. She asked if there was any possible way of keeping him enrolled since our classes promote positive values and foster a sense of belonging, none of which he was receiving anywhere else. In addition, she said he had never succeeded at anything and earning his yellow belt would mean a great deal to him. The only thing I could do was to tell her I would consider her request.

This was an unusual predicament and I needed to make a decision that could have disastrous consequences. If I expelled him from the class, he would experience yet

another failure. One more failure would mean further lowering his already low self-esteem. If I allowed him to stay in the classes, however, I may be training a potential time bomb who might eventually use martial arts to severely injure someone.

Being a graduate student in middle grades education at the time, I had formerly taken some graduate level coursework in special education. After carefully assessing the situation, I felt that implementing a behavioral (behavioral) contract would be the most appropriate approach. Moreover, a behavioral contract would allow Rex to continue participating in the classes while outlining specific expectations of the student, parent, and instructor. A breach of the contract may result in penalties such as a loss of rank, suspension, or expulsion. When honored, the contract states that Rex will be promoted to the next belt and earn the respect of his instructors, parent, and classmates.

Once I drew up the contract (see the appendix), I presented it to Rex and his mother. The student read the contract aloud. Then I asked him various questions to ensure that he understood the contents of the contract and everyone's responsibilities. Next, the student, parent, and instructors signed the contract. Finally, Rex's mother agreed to post the contract on their refrigerator to help Rex remember his agreement.

After signing the contract, Rex's positive attitude and behavior increased immensely in class, at home, and in school. He was awarded his yellow belt and is on a solid path to his next belt. Rex is a responsible member of the class. I have seen him encouraging other students and he even helps out with new students. If Rex continues to exhibit these characteristics, he will become one of my top students.

Behavioral contracts can be effective both inside and outside of the academic classroom. They offer structured guidelines for the student, which consist of expected

behaviors and consequences for undesired behaviors. I am convinced that when properly constructed, this type of instrument can be a powerful tool in shaping desirable behavior(s) of children in a variety of settings.

Appendix

Behavioral Contract
for the Martial Arts Classroom

I, _____, understand that I am responsible for my own actions. In addition, I understand that my action outside of my martial arts class reflects the values and philosophies of the Martial Arts Program. I understand that acting in an aggressive and violent manner is disgraceful and dishonors all that the Martial Arts stands for. I understand that my instructors have acted in compassion by giving me another chance to succeed in this program. I promise not to dishonor their intentions. Here are rules I will follow to avoid dishonoring my martial arts class, classmates, and instructors:

- I will **never** physically attack another person unless my life is threatened.
- I will act with respect toward my schoolteachers, my martial arts teachers, my classmates, and my parent(s).
- I will practice martial arts outside of class without being asked.
- I will complete **every** homework assignment for school.
- I will help out around the house **without being asked**.

If I do not follow these rules, I will either be stripped of any rank or be denied participation with the martial arts program for a period of time or indefinitely.

If I follow this contract, I understand that I will be promoted to the next belt. I will also earn the respect of my instructors, my parent(s), and my classmates. I also understand that I will bring great honor to myself and the martial arts.

I have heard/read and understand the above statement. By signing below, I agree to follow the stated rules. I understand the penalty for failing to follow this contract.

Students signature_____

We, the instructor(s) and parent(s), also understand this contract and its penalties. Not only will we enforce this contract, but also we will give guidance to the above student, _____, to aid in his/her success.

Parent signature_____

Instructor signature_____

Instructor signature_____

The student's progress will be evaluated on: _____

References

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